

ARTICLE APPEARS  
ON PAGE A27THE WASHINGTON POST  
23 April 1981*Stansfield Turner*

## No to AWACS

For more than 20 years, the United States helped the shah of Iran to build that country into the strongest military power in the Middle East. The shah's taste for the most sophisticated military hardware in our inventory was legend, and his shopping list was long, although Iran, a nation of 36 million, lacked the technical expertise to maintain and fully use the equipment it bought. Accordingly, it also had to purchase foreign technical help and support to keep its military machine running. We all know what happened.

In 1978, the Carter administration, with the consent of Congress, agreed to sell our newest and most advanced fighter aircraft, the F15, to Saudi Arabia. Because of the potential threat to Israel, Congress was explicitly promised that we would not also sell the Saudis the external fuel tanks that would extend the F15's range, or bomb racks that would turn it into an attack aircraft. By the spring of 1980, the Saudis were back asking for these external equipments as well as the super-sophisticated Airborne Warning and Command Aircraft, AWACS. AWACS is a Boeing 707 with a large rotating radar antenna on top and a vast complex of computer systems inside. It detects other aircraft at great distances, and tracks all air activity within its zone of coverage.

The Saudi rationale for their need for these additional F15 equipments and AWACS was that their situation had changed since they contracted for their F15s in 1978. Specifically, Iran had fallen into less friendly hands, and the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan. It would, therefore, be in the best interest of both the United States and Saudi Arabia—unquestionably a pro-Western force in the Middle East—for the Saudis to strengthen their ability to counter any other hostile moves in the region.

Their real concern, which was not a part of their argument, was that two years had elapsed and the Saudis had not seen enough progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. To test our resolve to push for a solution acceptable to the Arabs, the Saudis were asking us to take an action that would be opposed by Israel. It was one way to test whether we would eventually pressure Israel into making concessions on the Palestinian question. The Saudis were also buying time for themselves with the radical Arabs. By obtaining such a visible symbol of U.S. support, they could demonstrate to the radicals that their limited association with the United States had value. They thereby hoped to ward off additional pressures from the Arab radicals to break with the United States or even to use the oil weapon as a means of pressuring the United States to force concessions on Israel.

Having given the Saudis the F15s in 1978, it would be difficult to deny them the extra equipments under the present circumstances. Admittedly, long-range F15s and the AWACS in Saudi hands will present some added risk to the Israelis, but they are fully capable of handling it.

Whether we should permit the Saudis to purchase AWACS is another question. The Saudis are our friends. Providing them with AWACS would not be a friendly act because it would not be in their best interests. It is such a complex piece of military equipment that there is no way the Saudi military establishment could operate or maintain a fleet of them on its own. Saudi Arabia has only 4 million people on which to draw and has a lesser level of education than Iran. Even with extensive outside technical assistance, sustaining the AWACS would be a severe drain on the Saudi military technical resources. In the long run, they would resent the fact that they could not operate the AWACS and that they remained dependent on us.

More important, it would distract the attention of the Saudi leadership from more urgent military tasks. The most likely threats to Saudi Arabia are internal disorder or rebellion and guerrilla warfare, encouraged and supported by its neighbors. It would be wishful thinking to believe that a nation in as great a state of flux as is Saudi Arabia today would not be subject to domestic unrest or subversion. When such troubles develop, the Saudi security forces must have the capability of grappling with them.

In November 1979, Saudi military and domestic security forces proved themselves quite inept in quelling a minor disruption at the Great Mosque in Mecca. This was apparently a purely domestic matter, but in the future the Saudis must worry about subversion fomented by South Yemen, where the Soviets have a strong foothold; disorders in the vital oil fields, where there are large numbers of Shia Muslims who may be responsive to the Khomeini revolutionary movement; and perhaps even armed clashes with neighboring Iraq. The Saudis are not well prepared for any of these contingencies today. They have turned to Pakistan to supply mercenaries to help them, but the monarchy should have military and internal security forces of its own that are loyal and under its full control.

Against this background, it would be irresponsible

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for us to help them prepare to defeat a sophisticated air threat, for which the AWACS was designed and which has a low probability of occurring, when they are incapable of handling the more elementary threats of insurrection and guerrilla warfare that are highly probable. As friends, we should try to draw their attention to the realities of their situation. They do not need the AWACS nearly as much as they need other forms of military equipment and training. There is no way they can absorb AWACS into their military structure without detracting from their primary concerns. Even if there are short-term advantages to the United States in establishing some continuing military presence on the Arabian peninsula through the provision of AWACS, we should forgo that in favor of doing what a genuine and long-term friend would do: Be frank and put the friend's interests up front. That is the only way to protect our interests, anyway. Clearly this will not be an immediately popular response, but friends should not aspire to popularity.

We can mitigate the impact on the Saudis of turning them down on AWACS. We could give them a squadron of F15s immediately, several years ahead of the delivery of those they are purchasing. The U.S. Air Force would have to maintain and operate these for them for several years while Saudi pilots and mechanics complete their training. The Saudis, however, would see that we are serious about helping them all we can. They would also see, in time, that the way to be a friend is to be honest and frank rather than to say yes to an ill-advised request.

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